



## Stress Prevention and Management Approaches for Rescue Workers in the Aftermath of Disasters

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### **Why are these types of approaches important for the rescue workers?**

Taking part in rescue and recovery efforts after a disaster or terrorist act can be stressful for rescue workers. The long hours, the large scale of needs and demands, being unsure about roles, and being around human suffering can take its toll on even the most experienced professional. Rescue work can be personally rewarding and challenging, but it can also affect workers in harmful ways. Too often, the stress a rescue worker experiences isn't addressed soon or well enough. With a little effort, however, steps can be taken to help reduce the effects of stress.

### **What types of stress management and prevention should be addressed?**

Stress management and prevention should be looked at from two important viewpoints: the organization and the individual. Adopting a policy of stress prevention lets both workers and organizations plan ahead for stressors and responses, rather than simply reacting to a crisis when it happens.

### **What are some suggestions for stress prevention on an organizational level?**

#### **1. Provide a strong management structure and leadership.**

- A clear chain of command and simple lines of reporting should be organized.
- Supervisors should be reachable and available.
- Disaster orientation should be provided for all workers.
- Shifts should be no longer than 12 hours and should be followed by 12 hours off.
- Briefings should be given at the beginning of shifts as workers come back from their time off.
- Communication tools such as cell phones, radios, etc., need to be provided.

#### **2. Define clear purpose and goals.**

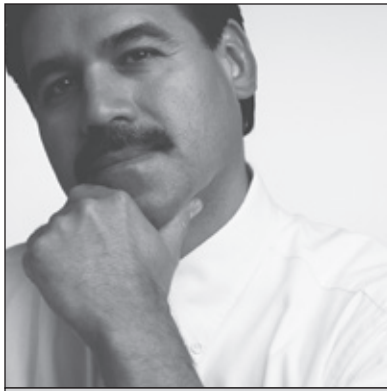
#### **3. Determine what needs to be done based on the setting.**

#### **4. Define workers roles by function.**

**5. Orient and train staff with written job descriptions for each setting. When the setting is under the command of another agency, like Red Cross or FEMA, make sure workers know each agency's role, contact people and expectations.**

#### **6. Encourage team support.**

**7. Create a "buddy system" to help watch for signs of stress reactions. Promote a positive atmosphere of support and tolerance that includes frequent praise.**



## **8. Develop a plan for stress management.**

- Pay attention to how workers are handling their tasks.
- Rotate workers between low-stress, mid-stress and high-stress tasks.
- Encourage breaks and time away from their assignment.
- Educate all workers on the signs and symptoms of worker stress reactions, as well as strategies for how to cope.
- Provide individual and group events for stress release and debriefing.
- Develop an exit plan for workers leaving the operation. Include a debriefing session, information on how to reenter the scene, an opportunity for the worker to critique the operation and a formal recognition of their service.

## **What are some suggestions for stress prevention on an individual level?**

### **1. Manage workload.**

- Set priority levels and realistic time lines.
- Ask management to reassign your normal duties to make sure you are not trying to do disaster response in addition to your usual job.

### **2. Balance lifestyle.**

- Get exercise and stretch your muscles when possible.
- Eat well and avoid excessive junk food, caffeine, alcohol or tobacco.
- Get enough sleep and rest, especially on longer assignments.
- Keep in contact with your loved ones for social support.

### **3. Apply stress reduction techniques.**

- Reduce tension by taking deep breaths, using meditation, walking, etc.
- Use your time off for exercise, reading, listening to music, taking a bath, talking to family or getting a special meal.
- Talk about your emotions and reactions with coworkers as appropriate.

### **4. Practice self-awareness.**

- Recognize and give attention to early warning signs for stress reactions.
- Accept that you may not be able to recognize all your stress reactions on your own.
- Avoid over-identifying with the grief and trauma of survivors or victims, which may interfere with discussing painful material.
- Understand the differences between professional, helping relationships and friendships.
- Examine your personal prejudices and stereotypes.
- Be mindful that vicarious traumatization or compassion fatigue may develop.
- Recognize when a personal experience or loss is interfering with your ability to do your job.

## **Where can I find help?**

For additional assistance, contact your local public health department, community mental health center, a counselor or a mental health professional.

The information in this fact sheet was adapted from a publication by the Center for Mental Health Services of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

